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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the Shaker educational system, analyzes the development of Shaker schools, and examines the innovative practices that the Shakers used to ready children for the world of their time. Originating in England among illiterate working class people, the movement was established in New England in 1774. Basic characteristics of the movement included a rural commune lifestyle; equality of the sexes; separation of adults by sex and of children from parents; and disapproval of intemperance, monopoly, sexual intercourse, capital punishment, and war. Shaker schools were developed in the early 1800's. They combined rigorous discipline with affectionate teaching and study of useful skills. The curriculum was better than that of public schools at the time; teaching techniques employed open classroom ideas, student tutors, team teaching, infant education, and interdisciplinary studies. Shaker education became less unique late in the 19th century when public school standards were improved and teacher certification was mandated. The Shaker life style itself became less popular in the 20th century as mass marketing, social agencies, equal rights movement, and financial complexity became common. However, as modern-day resources are appearing to be limited, the Shakers' simple life style may attract new interest. (AV)

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AN ANALYSIS OF SHAKER EDUCATION

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF AN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM, 1774 - 1950

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AN ANALYSIS OF SHAKER EDUCATION:
THE LIFE AND DEATH OF AN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM, 1774-1950

The Shakers, an American alternative life style group, have been living in rural communes and practicing celibacy and a unique blend of millennial Christianity for over two hundred years. Education, either formally or informally, has always played a major role in the Shaker life style. In their time the Shakers assumed both physical and educational responsibility for thousands of children. S[illegible]were the children of converts, but many were orphans, waifs and foundlings wh[illegible]ceived their education in the schools established by the Shakers at a time when no one else cared about them.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the Shaker educational system, to analyze the development of the Shaker schools and to look at the innovative practices that the Shakers used to ready children for the world of their time. Most of the research for this study was conducted at the several Shaker collections in Winterhur Museum at Wilmington, Delaware, Western Reserve Historical Collection in Cleveland, Ohio, Old Chatham Shaker Museum at Old Chatham, New York, Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, Massachusetts and Hancock Shaker Village in Hancock, Massachusetts. Especially valuable material was obtained from the last two remaining Shaker communities in Canterbury, New Hampshire and Sabbathday Lake, Maine. The majority of the sources investigated were handwritten journals that chronicled daily life among the Shakers. A thorough investigation of the prominent critics of the Shakers was also undertaken in order to gain some understanding of the challenge posed to the survival of the Shaker world. Oral interviews were conducted with many of the surviving Shakers and several people who were educated in the Shaker Schools.

Shakerism originally developed in England's urban slums among illiterate working class people who believed they were in actual contact with God. After years of persecution and scorn, in 1774 a small group of seven believers followed one prominent leader, Ann Lee, to search for religious sanctuary in America. For years this nucleus of American Shakerism lived in poverty in a cabin near Albany, New York struggling to survive and formulating the basic tenets of their church. This new religion was extremely controversial, and the early Shakers suffered severe persecution. As a consequence, Ann and her two most prominent followers from England all died young.

In the mid-1780's the leadership of the Shakers passed to Joseph Meacham who quickly appointed a devout Shaker, Lucy Wright, to a position of equal leadership. Together they created a unique American community in the early 1800's[1] in which hundreds of children grew to adulthood. By establishing rural communes which were among the first places in America to stress equality of the sexes and equal membership for blacks, Indians and Jews,[2] the Shakers consolidated their religion. When whole families joined the community, the adults were separated by sex. All the children were placed in the Children's Order, a separate but integral unit of the Shaker community which was directed by specially trained caretakers.

The Shakers believed that they were living in the millennium. Creating a suitable heaven-on-earth community occupied all their time. School was a luxury

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[1] Anna White and Leila S. Taylor. Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message Embracing An Historical Account, Statement of Belief And Spiritual Experience of The Church From Its Rise To The Present Day. Columbus, Ohio: Fred J. Heer, 1904. p. 74.

[2] Edward Deming Andrews. The People Called Shakers: A Search For The Perfect Society. New York: Dover, 1953. p. 82.

which the Believers felt they did not need, a view that the Shakers shared in common with most rural people of the day. Children and their caretakers, all working at their own rate of speed, did whatever was essential for the growth of the community.[3] Formal learning was provided only in random moments. Fundamental skills such as reading and writing were taught in a series of quick lessons to anyone in the community who wanted to learn. For nearly twenty years education was scattered and informal while the policies of the faith were codified into a formal system of belief. In addition to their beliefs in communal property, the duality of God (The Shaker believed that the God force had appeared twice on Earth: first as Christ, second as Mother Ann), the Shaker millennium and complete separation of the sexes, other fundamental tenets included the acceptance of equal rights for men and women, and strong convictions about the inherent evils of intemperance, monopoly, sexual intercourse, capital punishment and war. Most Shakers also believed in the perfectability of men and women, spiritualism and the idea that Shaker communities should be temporarily and spiritually isolated from the rest of the world.[4]

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[3]Marian Klamkin. Hands To Work: Shaker Folk Art And Industries. New York: Dodd Mead, 1972, p. 112.

[4](Calvin Green and Seth Young Wells). A Summary View Of The Millenial Church Or United Society Of Believers, (Commonly Called Shakers). Comprising The Rise, Progress (Practical Order Of The Society), Together With The General Principles Of Their Faith And Testimony. Published By Order Of The Ministry, In Union With The Church. Albany, New York: Packard and Van Benthuysen, 1823.

In the early 1800's the Shaker communities became theocracies with a leadership that appointed deacons and trustees who filled other important positions of trust. This new generation of leaders decided that a community should not become too large and impersonal. Instead, small groups called families were created in each community. Each family had its own elders and deacons and these people made day to day decisions.

The Shaker communities were economically successful, and this economic success attracted many indigent families who offered their children to the Shakers to raise and educate under the indenture system. Often orphans, waifs and foundlings were also adopted into the Shaker communes. Children raised by the Shakers, even in the earliest years, were taught several different hand skills, were given rudimentary schooling and from all personal accounts were treated with kindness and love.[5] However, in the early years, the children often had to live with the fear of attack from violent mobs made up of people from surrounding communities who believed that the children in the Shaker world should be rescued from unorthodox beliefs. Kidnappers were a major fear. Therefore, the pacifist Shakers, wary of strangers, usually kept the Children's Order out of sight of the curious.

This Children's Order was the Shaker child's world. All the boys were together nearly all the time and were separated nearly all the time from the girls. The worked with special tools at necessary work at their own pace. They

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[5] Elder H. C. Blinn. Church Record: 1784-1879. Handwritten journal, Canterbury, New Hampshire . p. 146.

absorbed the Shaker life style with their every action. Although the Shaker leadership was careful not to directly proselytize the children, the youngsters saw very little of the outside world, and, consequently, knew little else but Shakerism.

The Children's Order was supervised by specially trained caretakers who regulated all aspects of the children's activities. These caretakers impressed communal ethics on the children by both precept and example. They stressed the values of honesty, punctuality, and uprightness, the belief in a clear conscience, neatness, cleanliness, and industry, as well as the values of prudence, temperance, good economy, and the virtues of kindness, love and charity's civility, decency and good order. The children were taught to avoid anger and strife and to work for the happiness of each other.[6]

Life in the Children's Order, which was maintained throughout Shaker history, was patterned after the same ordered rhythm as that in the adult community. Everyone rose early in the morning, before five in the summer, before five-thirty in the winter. A short prayer started the day. Rooms were put in order and the children went off to their morning chores. Breakfast time varied a little but usually it was at seven o'clock or before. The meals were conducted in silence, and there were many specific regulations on proper eating habits. In fact, there were many rules on nearly all aspects of Shaker life. These laws in general were

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[6]Edward Deming Andrews. The Gift To Be Simple: Songs, Dances and Rituals Of The American Shakers. New York: Dover, 1940. p. 6.

designed to allow a large number of people living in a relatively small area to work and worship without intruding upon each other. Shaker communities were tranquil. Unnecessary speech was uncommon. What speech there was was subdued. Everyone walked softly and doors were opened and shut with care. When nightfall came, everyone returned to their rooms, prayed, went to bed, and according to the rules "laid straight."[7]

Many critics of the Shakers' child rearing practices focus on this "unnatural quiet and restraint." But the diaries of the caretakers and the reminiscences of children raised by the Shakers indicate that the young had a busy and often enjoyable life. There were potato fights, games of hide and seek, playing Indian, amateur theatrics, fishing, skating, picnics and many other outlets for the natural exuberance of youth.[8]

The Shaker children while enjoying play, were also prodigious workers. They split wood, milked cows, plowed, hoed, weeded, and harvested, ironed, cooked, sewed, knitted and were carefully trained in an indenture system to help them master crafts and skills. Very early in the history of the Shaker communities the intermingling of work and play became a constant fixture of Shaker Life.[9]

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[7] Millennial Laws or Gospel Statues And Ordinances Adapted To The Day Of Christ's Second Appearing. Given And Established In The Church For The Protection There Of By Father Joseph Meacham And Mother Lucy Wright, The Presiding Ministry, And By Their Successors. The Ministry And Elders. Recorded At New Lebanon August 7th, 1821. Revised And Re-established By The Ministry And Elders, October, 1845. (Handwritten, unpaged journal in The Andrews Collection of Henry Francis du Pont's Winterthur Museum, Wilmington, Delaware.

[8] Hervey Elkins. Fifteen Years In The Senior Order Of Shakers; A Narration Of Facts Concerning The Singular People. Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth, 1853. pp. 47-48.

[9] Elisha D. Blakeman, et al. The Boys Journal Of Work, New Lebanon, New York: (1843-1849) Handwritten journal, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

The first large scale, formal Shaker schooling began in 1805, when the Shakers began to create new communities in Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. Schools with as many as a hundred students were sometimes in operation within the first months of these new communities' existence, staffed by prominent leaders from the community. The Shakers had discovered that good schools attracted converts and made the children of these converts happier. This success was soon emulated in the eastern Shaker communities.[10] The Shakers totally committed themselves to making a success of these projects. Once they were convinced of the value of formal schooling, the Shakers devoted much effort to creating a school system which in many ways was superior to most public schools in America.

The most important single figure in Shaker educational history was a well-educated former academy teacher, Seth Y. Wells. For approximately three decades (circa 1815-1844) he unified the Shaker curriculum, trained teachers, established schools and traveled to all the eastern communities to publicize and promote Shaker education. He believed that the Lancastrian System, a monitorial method in which students were trained to help teach other students, was particularly well adapted to the Shakers' needs. He stressed the importance of involving the Shaker leaders' in the day to day life of the schools, and he advocated opening the Shaker schools to outside visitors. Wells broadened the curriculum to include subjects such as surveying and bookkeeping which were unavailable in the average rural school of the time.[11] He was simultaneously superintendent of

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[10] Isaac N. Youngs. A Concise View Of The Church Of God And Of Christ On Earth Having Its Formations In The Faith Of Christ's First and Second Happening. New Lebanon, New York. 1856. Handwritten Manuscript in the Winterthur Museum, Wilmington, Delaware. p. 369.

[11] Seth Y. Wells. School Instructions. 1844. Handwritten manuscript, Cathcart Shaker Collections, Western Reserve Historical Society. Cleveland, Ohio.

all the Shaker schools, as well as the person responsible for all Shaker publications. Wells trained his teachers to be flexible, to stress skills that would be most useful to the students as adults and to maintain mild and affectionate discipline. In a time when flogging children was commonplace, the Shakers' most severe tactic was to remove the child from the community. In Wells' view, the emphasis of education should be on character building and on promoting kindness.[12]

Wells traveled extensively recording his impressions of innovative teaching practices that he saw in action. At the same time he looked for any new labor saving devices that might improve the quality of Shaker life. He absorbed a broad spectrum of learning techniques and implemented the best of these ideas into the Shaker schools. As a result of his activities, there was a constant cross-fertilization of ideas among the various Shaker teachers who eagerly shared their own successful techniques, methods and materials.

Teacher enthusiasm was an important element in the success of Shaker education. The Shakers would not do anything halfway, and once they began to expand their program, they regularly offered courses such as algebra, astronomy and agricultural chemistry, courses very uncommon in the public schools of the day. The curriculum slowly expanded throughout the nineteenth century to include subjects

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[12]Seth Y. Wells. A Plain Statement Of The Custom And Manner Of Receiving, Managing, Teaching, Governing And Disciplining Children In The Society Of People Called Shakers. 1815. Handwritten manuscript, Cathcart Shaker Collection, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

which had been forbidden only a few years before. There was a wide range of subjects offered by 1880, when at least some of the Shaker children were learning geometry, free hand drawing, sewing, piano, elocution, drama, canning, French, vocal music and physiology.[13]

Despite Wells' unifying influence, and the fact that the entire American Shaker community played a significant role in all Shaker education, there were some differences within the Shaker schools. In spite of differences in location, state law and numbers of students, excellence and the search for perfection were found whenever there were Shakers schools. Frequently, the Shakers received a share of the local tax money to run their schools, which meant that the Shaker school had also become the public school. Even then the Shaker town school was usually superior to other nearby town schools. Since the Shaker teachers received no salary, the entire budget could be spent on planning, materials and supplies.[14] Sometimes each Shaker "family" had its own school; however, a school for the entire community was more common. The Shaker schools were sometimes public, then private, and then public again. In the twentieth century when there were very few Shaker schools left, the variation continued. The Maine schools were public district schools, but Canterbury, New Hampshire had a private school the last twenty years of its existence, while Mount Lebanon, New York experimented with a boarding school for young women.

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[13] Enfield Town Report And Town Officers Of Enfield, New Hampshire, For The Year Ending March 1, 1881. Lebanon, New Hampshire: A. B. Freedman, 1881. p. 125.

[14] School District #12. Town Of New Lebanon, N.Y. (1890 to 1905) Handwritten Journal, King Library, Shaker Museum, Old Chatham, N.Y. p. 89.

The Shaker schools were flexible and innovative. Many Shaker students were exposed to what we now call team teaching, flexible scheduling, the all-year school, student published texts, activity periods during the day, infant education, oral reports, and interdisciplinary studies. It was common for small rewards of candy and merit ribbons to be awarded for work well done. Nearly all Shaker schools stressed the use of concrete objects to reinforce learning; thus, globes, boxes of type, rods of various length, blocks, kernels of corn or bags of beans and other materials which were both instructive and pleasurable were abundantly available in Shaker schools.[15]

The Shaker schools were far ahead of their public school counterparts in many activities. In the 1840's for example, although adult Shakers did not vote, the Shaker schools were using the state laws and state government publications as texts. Abstract mathematical problems were tested by going to the farm or shop and actually seeing practical application of theory.[16] New techniques of vocabulary building, the combined teaching of geography and poetry, and learning that took place in community arboretums were additional Shaker innovations.

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[15]Prudie A. Stickney and Ada S. Cummings. The History Of The Children In The Church Of West Gloucester. Taken From Mary H. Grant, May 26, 1882. By Prudie B. Stickney and Ada S. Cummings. Left To Ada's Care Alone, December 4, 1884. Lizzy Bailey Became Assistant December 1, 1901. Sabbathday Lake, Maine Shaker Community.

[16]Farm Journal, 1858 to 1967. Church Family, New Lebanon, New York. Handwritten journal in Hancock Shaker Village Library, Hancock, Massachusetts.

The public school movement was still struggling to become a viable reality at a time when the Shakers had schools in all eighteen of their communities. Many of these schools abounded in the little humanistic touches found today in open education programs. Couches were provided for the younger children to rest on during the day. Although Shaker children were admonished to avoid display, the need to express honest emotions was also stressed. Shaker leaders believed that true learning could not take place unless there was love between the students and the teachers. Love, kindness and forbearance were regarded as the base for all education. Journals recommended honest praise for the accomplishments of less gifted students, and some schools experimented with a non-graded program in which each child advanced at his or her own pace.[17] Self-worth and group pride were essential elements of Shaker education.

When the public school movement gained momentum in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Shakers were its strong supporters. They heartily approved of any activity that might improve the general state of humanity. They attended public school conferences, making suggestions and sharing successful teaching techniques. Frequently public school supervisors suggested that the public schools should look to the Shaker schools as a model.[18] The Shakers had

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[17] Anna Dodgson. A Memorandum For Myself, To Be Remembered By Myself, Concerning No One! But Myself. Handwritten journal beginning June, 1859. King Library, Shakers Museum, Old Chatham, New York.

[18] One fairly typical report was made by Enfield, New Hampshire Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Skinner who praised the Shakers schools as "commodious, well supplied with apparatus, convenient and scrupulously neat." He called the school one of the world's most pleasant spots. See Wilson B. Roberts. "Enfield Rural Schools". The Reporter And Advocate. Canaan, New Hampshire, June 7, 1951.

always hoped to be an institution others could emulate. Meacham had stressed the creation of a faultless social order as an example to all people. When the Shaker communities began to decline in population, the Shakers reasoned that even if few children remained in the community at adulthood, the experiences of all the children educated in their schools had helped the Shakers and had made the children better men and women. Eventually, the majority of children educated by the Shakers began to leave the community as they became young adults, but their Shaker school experience--from the available evidence--seems to have helped them to lead successful lives.

The Shakers valued freedom too much to proselytize the children they educated. Although the Bible was a standard text in Shaker schools (as it was in nearly all public schools), the Shakers kept special religious instructions out of their program. Neighborhood children and the children of helpers hired by the Shakers received the same education as the Shaker children.

Slowly beginning in the late 1800's government regulations began to demand that public schools have higher standards. Thus, the gap between the Shakers schools and those of their neighbor's began to narrow. When state laws mandated teacher certification, the Shakers promptly complied. Eventually, some of the Shaker teachers attended normal school or received college training.

The community remained an important and integral part of Shaker education. A major component of learning was always the actual practice and day-to-day activities of the Shaker people. Shaker education functioned much like the career education model of today. The children learned from their caretakers, their teachers and all of the Shaker craftsmen with whom they worked. The Shaker children learned farming skills in their own communities which were the only

places in America where scientific farming was carried on systematically on a large scale. They learned conservation and reforestation from the first Americans to make a practical attempt to stop the abuse of nature by people. They were surrounded by inventive people who prized ingenuity and created hundreds of new machines and improvements to ease labor (among their accomplishments were the circular saw, clothespins, the flat broom and for the school a new chalk, an improved blackboard, and the metal pen). The children received practical training in the many and varied activities of Shaker industry. Constant job rotation provided an industrial reserve, distributed responsibility and increased pleasure in work. When the children left the schools and the Children's Order to enter the mainstream of Shaker or American Life, they were skilled in a variety of activities. It was expected that the graduates would be competent to assume an important role in the community.

Throughout their history the Shakers viewed education as a communal undertaking, an activity selectively available to anyone who needed it throughout life. From the beginning in the late 1700's, classes for adults, learning groups which contained both adults and children and continuous retraining were all common among the Shakers. In fact, in America today, some educational reformers are advocating a position that the Shakers assumed with a degree of success almost two hundred years ago. The Shakers benefited from having small groups of people with common needs working together, a lesson still being taught by alternative life style groups. They took advantage of the instructional capabilities of the community, involving community leaders and utilizing community experience as standard supplementary learning methods. Several contemporary reformers suggest that this could still be done in America.

Unfortunately, the Shaker communities which were so well adapted for growth and success in the nineteenth century failed to adapt to the needs of the twentieth century. The assembly line and mass marketing lessened the demand for hand-crafted quality goods. The faster pace of life made the Shaker communities seem anachronistic. The American community in organizing social agencies such as orphanages began to assume responsibility for children who might otherwise have gone to the Shakers. The Civil War had destroyed some of the Shaker communities in the South as well as a major market for their goods. Religious revivals which had often provided the Shakers with many converts ceased to stir large numbers of people. Women slowly began to gain equal rights which made the equality of the sexes in the Shaker communities seem less unique. Many Shaker communities found themselves in the position of being land poor and ill equipped to function in the complex financial world of today. The celibate Shakers in the face of these problems never compromised on their fundamental tenets, and today only a handful stubbornly endure. Part of their survival can be traced to their excellent education which provides many parallels to programs proposed by some alternate education spokesmen.

In conclusion, in a world slowly learning that there is an ultimate limit to its resources, the Shakers' simple, dedicated life style is also attracting new interest. Although most of the educational innovations implemented by the Shakers have now been incorporated into our better school systems, even today with only a handful of Shakers still alive, people continue to learn from the Shaker experience. A number of characteristics of Shaker education--the importance of community, flexibility, equality of the sexes, warmth, and dedication--are gaining new adherents and propoenents. Unfortunately, we have yet to attain the develop-

ment of a sense of community in which education is part of the community experience and in which the community is intimately involved in the education of the young in an environment that is warm and trusting. The Shakers, however, have shown that it can be done.

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